European Proceedings of
Social and Behavioural Sciences
EpSBS

www.europeanproceedings.com
e-ISSN: 2357-1330

DOI: 10.15405/epsbs.2026.09.66

ICMC 2025
The 4th International Conference on Management and Communication

EXPOSING MALAYSIA'S CULINARY HERITAGE IN TOURISM DESTINATIONS

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Abstract

Malaysia's rich culinary heritage, shaped by the interwoven influences of Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Indigenous cultures, has become an increasingly prominent element in the nation's tourism landscape. This study critically examines the role of the Malaysian government in leveraging culinary heritage within its tourism development strategies. This qualitative study undertook a content analysis of official promotional materials on Instagram, including food festival documentation, digital media campaigns, and tourism posters. The findings indicate that structured initiatives such as the Malaysian Gastronomy Programme and the Malaysia Food Festival have played a central role in celebrating food diversity, reinforcing cultural identity, and enriching tourist experiences. However, the analysis also reveals an underlying tension between the drive for marketable imagery and the need to authentically represent Malaysia's multifaceted food traditions. The study argues for a more collaborative and decentralized governance approach that links national promotional strategies with local culinary communities. It offers practical recommendations for tourism stakeholders, including strategies for safeguarding heritage, enhancing cooperation, and promoting regional cuisines. This research contributes to ongoing discourse on cultural tourism, destination differentiation, as well as heritage sustainability and future tourism development.

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Keywords: Culinary heritage, social media, food tourism, tourism destinations

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https://doi.org/10.15405/epsbs.2026.09.66
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eISSN: 2357-1330

1. Introduction

The promotion of local culinary heritage has become crucial in destination marketing, particularly as tourism destinations strive to differentiate themselves in a highly competitive global marketplace (Stalmirska & Ali, 2023). In this evolving landscape, food tourism, defined as travel primarily motivated by the pursuit of authentic and meaningful culinary encounters, has transitioned from a niche segment to a mainstream tourism trend (Shariff et al., 2024). Integrating culinary elements into broader tourism development strategies enhances the overall visitor experience (Ellis et al., 2018; Sims, 2009). As destinations invest in showcasing their gastronomic distinctiveness, culinary heritage is thus repositioned as both a marketable commodity and a tool for cultural continuity and preservation (Ibrahim et al., 2023).

Malaysia presents a particularly compelling case for exploring the interplay between culinary heritage and tourism, owing to its multi-ethnic and demographic composition (Jalis et al., 2024). The coexistence and intermingling of Malay, Chinese, Indian, and numerous indigenous culinary traditions have produced a gastronomic landscape. In this context, food operates not only as a material necessity but also as a powerful symbolic medium through which Malaysia's identity and heritage are negotiated and represented (Ibrahim et al., 2023; Roslan, 2022).

Malaysia's cuisine reflects its multicultural society, incorporating Malay, Chinese, Indian, and indigenous influences. This diversity not only enriches the dining experience but also tells the story of the nation's heritage and cultural identity (Ismail et al., 2014). Recent studies have drawn attention to the importance of Malaysia's culinary heritage in shaping destination branding (Shariff et al., 2025; Zain et al., 2023). In this context, cuisine operates beyond the realm of taste it becomes a medium of cultural communication that reflects identity, evokes memory, and enhances the tourism encounter (Ishak et al., 2023; Richards, 2012).

In response to this growing recognition, the Malaysian government has introduced several structured initiatives to integrate gastronomy into its national tourism strategies (Ramli et al., 2020;). These initiatives signal a shift in policy direction, positioning food culture as a strategic driver of regional tourism, place identity, and cultural diplomacy. However, despite these efforts, ongoing concerns remain regarding the coherence, authenticity, and inclusivity of government promotional approaches (Shariff, 2024; Wondirad et al., 2021). Additionally, there is limited empirical evidence assessing how these strategies influence long-term sustainability or contribute meaningfully to destination competitiveness.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Foundation of Culinary Tourism

Food evokes diverse culinary associations and plays an important role in shaping cultural and tourism experiences. The definition of food is different for everyone, some just love to eat food, some are quite specific about their meals, and some are health conscious regarding their food habits, but everyone wants to explore cuisines worldwide (Ellis et al., 2018; Shariff et al., 2025). Beyond its functional purpose of sustenance, food is a fundamental aspect of a destination's cultural fabric, reflecting the traditions, history, and identity of a place (Omar et al., 2025; Timothy & Ron, 2013).

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Food is not only a vital component of a country's cultural heritage but also a pivotal driver of tourism. Many studies have highlighted the role of local food in shaping the tourist experience, noting its ability to provide a deeper understanding of a destination's cultural and social fabric (Putri & Baskoro, 2021; Shariff et al., 2024). When tourists engage with regional cuisines, they can immerse themselves in the authentic flavours, preparation methods, and traditions that have been passed down through generations, thereby gaining a more meaningful connection to the local way of life (Ishak et al., 2023; Kivela & Crotts, 2006). The Malaysian government has recognised the importance of promoting local food heritage as a means of sustainable tourism development.

The field incorporates cultural and marketing perspectives that conceptualise food as a form of symbolic meaning and heritage (Everett, 2015). In particular, authentic and immersive culinary engagements have been linked to increased tourist spending, repeat visitation, and positive word-of-mouth all of which are critical to fostering sustainable tourism development (Omar et al., 2025; Shariff et al., 2024).

2.2. Government Role in Culinary Tourism Development

Governments serve as an institution to shape the culinary tourism landscape through destination branding, the organization of cultural events, the empowerment of food entrepreneurs, and the preservation of gastronomic heritage (Putri & Baskoro, 2021; Sanip et al., 2024). Singapore's commitment to preserving hawker centres reflects efforts to institutionalize everyday culinary practices as intangible heritage, while Peru's formal recognition of gastronomy as a key element of national identity illustrates how food can be leveraged for cultural diplomacy and tourism branding (Aguirre-Sosa et al., 2023; Chua et al., 2024). Collectively, these examples highlight the importance of coordinated state action in fostering enabling environments for sustainable culinary tourism and legitimizing food culture within national development agendas.

Table 1 below presents a comprehensive analysis of tourist arrivals and expenditures in Malaysia's tourism sector, underscoring their substantial impact on the nation's economic revenue, especially within the tourism industry. Table 1 displays statistics on tourist arrivals and associated tourism revenue, illustrating the essential contribution of the tourism industry to economic growth and national development.

Table 1. Numbers of tourist arrival to Malaysia

Year	Arrivals (millions)	Receipt (RM) billions
1. 2024	27.3 (projected)	102.7 (projected
2. 2023	20.14	71.3
3. 2022	10.07	28.23
4. 2021	0.13	0.24
5. 2020	4.33	12.7

Another government initiative is the "Malaysia Truly Asia" campaign, which highlights the country's cultural diversity, including its vibrant food scene. This campaign has been instrumental in raising global awareness of Malaysian cuisine and positioning the country as a premier gastronomic destination (Jalis et al., 2024; Shariff et al., 2024; Som et al., 2020). Furthermore, the government has invested in the

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development of food-related infrastructure, such as night markets, food courts, and centralised kitchens, to support the growth of the local food industry and provide platforms for showcasing regional specialities.

The promotion of local food heritage is increasingly recognised as an essential strategy for destination marketing and development (Henderson, 2009; Som et al., 2020). Food has become an integral part of the tourist experience, with tourists seeking authentic and unique culinary offerings that reflect the local culture and identity. As such, the Malaysian government has made concerted efforts to showcase the country's rich food heritage as a means of attracting tourists and enhancing the overall tourism experience (Raji et al., 2020; Sanip et al., 2024; Shariff et al., 2024). Furthermore, despite these efforts, issues have arisen regarding Malaysia's government roles in promoting local food heritage and authenticity to the degree of which local food heritage is effectively leveraged to shape tourist behaviour and visitation.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Approach and Design

This study employed a qualitative research approach grounded in the interpretive paradigm to examine the Malaysian government’s role in promoting culinary heritage within tourism destinations. The interpretive approach was considered most appropriate for uncovering the complex social, cultural, and institutional dynamics that inform culinary tourism development. By prioritizing the perspectives of key stakeholders, this methodology facilitates a nuanced understanding of how food heritage policies, practices, and narratives are constructed, communicated, and implemented. In contrast to quantitative methods, which emphasize generalizability and statistical patterns, the interpretive tradition enables a context-rich exploration of meaning-making processes and the interconnections between tourism governance, cultural identity, and place-making (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Hall & Mitchell, 2005). This approach thus offers valuable insights into the symbolic and strategic roles of culinary heritage in shaping Malaysia’s tourism landscape.

The research design incorporated multiple data sources to enhance validity and provide comprehensive insights into government promotional strategies and their implications. This multi-source approach enabled triangulation of findings and deeper understanding of the research phenomenon from different perspectives.

A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to identify and select documents most relevant to the study’s objectives. The study involved a thorough review of relevant promotional online materials. This comprehensive analysis aimed to gain a deep understanding of the government's approach to preserving and promoting local culinary heritage in the context of culinary heritage and tourism destinations. The findings from the document analysis identified challenges, and opportunities related to the government's role in promoting local food heritage and its implications for tourism development in Malaysia. Data collection involved systematic analysis of promotional materials and government documents related to culinary tourism initiatives. The primary data sources included in Table 2.

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Table 2. Promotional material and sources from year 2022-2024

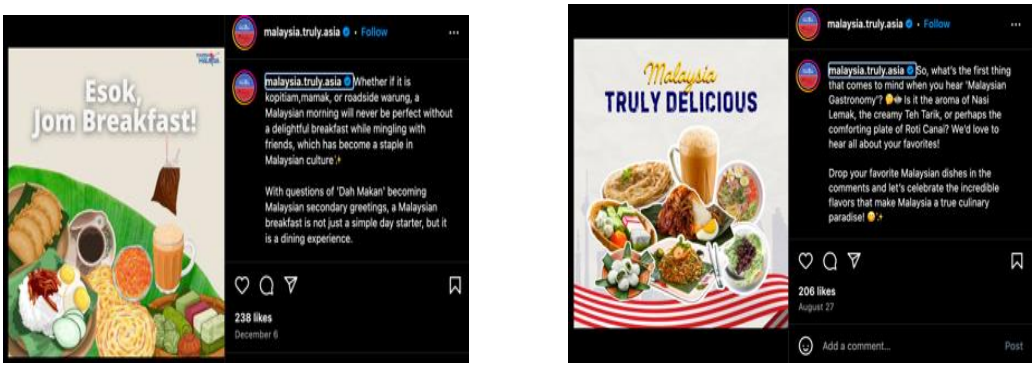
Tourism promotional material	Sources
Official Government Publications	Policy documents, strategic plans, and promotional materials from Tourism Malaysia, Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture, and related government agencies.
Digital Marketing Materials	Official tourism websites and social media content specifically focused on Malaysian culinary heritage and food tourism.
Event Documentation:	Materials related to government-organized culinary events including the Malaysia Food Festival and international promotional campaigns.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Government Initiatives in Culinary Heritage Promotion

The study's findings reveal that the Malaysian government has made significant efforts to promote local food heritage as a strategic component of its tourism development. The Malaysia Food Festival is a prime example of government led initiatives that aim to showcase the country's diverse culinary traditions and attract tourists. Analysis of government promotional materials reveals a comprehensive approach to leveraging Malaysia's culinary heritage for tourism development. The Malaysian government has implemented multiple strategic initiatives designed to showcase the country's diverse food culture and position Malaysia as a premier gastronomic destination,

The Malaysia Kitchen Programme represents the government's flagship international culinary promotion initiative (Jalis et al., 2024). Launched with the objective of establishing Malaysian cuisine in global markets, this Programme encompasses restaurant establishment support, chef training, international food festivals, and collaboration with culinary influencers (Nahar et al., 2018; Putri & Baskoro, 2021). The festival incorporates educational and experiential elements including live cooking demonstrations, traditional performances, and storytelling sessions that contextualize food practices within their socio-cultural and historical backgrounds. As illustrated in Figure 1 (a) and (b,) these components reflect a deliberate effort to position culinary heritage not only as a tourism attraction but also as a conduit for intercultural dialogue and a tool for destination branding.



(a) (b)

Figure 1. (a) & (b) Malaysian Tourism official Instagram on food promotion year 2024

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An examination of Tourism Malaysia's digital marketing strategies reveals a strategically curated use of social media platforms to promote the nation's culinary heritage. Platforms such as Instagram are employed to disseminate high resolution visual content featuring traditional dishes, bustling street food environments, and culturally embedded dining experiences. Notably, the "Malaysia Truly Asia" campaign leverages culinary imagery to reinforce themes of multiculturalism and national identity. Content analysis indicates that food related visuals constitute approximately 40% (118 out of 295 items) of the tourism focused posts across these platforms, suggesting the centrality of gastronomy in the digital branding of Malaysia as a tourism destination. This shows the role of visual media in shaping destination image and influencing tourist expectations in an increasingly image-driven tourism marketplace (Choe & Kim, 2018; Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2016)

4.2. Effectiveness of Promotional Strategies

The results indicate that the Malaysian government's role in promoting local food heritage is expected to have a positive impact. The previous study also confirms that place attachment mediated the relationship between Malaysian tourists perceived authenticity of local food and their willingness to visit a destination (Ismail et al., 2014; Som at el., 2020). Based on these findings, the study has drawn conclusions and implications that provide valuable insights into how the authenticity of local food can be leveraged by marketers to promote destinations and culinary tourism. The findings suggest that the government's efforts to showcase Malaysia's diverse culinary traditions can enhance the appeal of tourism destinations, as tourists are increasingly seeking authentic and immersive food experiences when visiting a destination.

Analysis reveals several strengths in current promotional approaches. The integration of culinary themes across multiple marketing channels creates consistent brand messaging that reinforces Malaysia's position as a food destination (Som et al., 2020). The emphasis on cultural diversity resonates with contemporary tourism trends toward authentic and meaningful experiences. Visual content quality meets international standards and effectively communicates the vibrancy and appeal of Malaysian cuisine (Omar et al., 2025).

Although government-led culinary tourism campaigns in Malaysia demonstrate both strategic scope and professional execution, their effectiveness in achieving intended outcomes remains uneven (Shariff et al., 2025). Tourist flows are shaped by a constellation of factors, such as global travel trends, economic conditions, public health concerns, and geopolitical developments that complicate attribution to any single initiative. Consequently, although culinary heritage may contribute significantly to Malaysia's tourism appeal, its role should be understood within the broader context of an integrated and multi-dimensional tourism development strategy.

4.3. Cultural Representation and Economic Implication

The challenge of maintaining authenticity while appealing to international audiences represents a fundamental tension in culinary tourism promotion. Government materials demonstrate efforts to balance these competing demands through strategies including collaboration with cultural communities, emphasis on traditional preparation methods, and inclusion of historical context (Raji et al., 2020; Shariff, 2024). However, the commercial imperatives driving tourism promotion often pose challenges to the authenticity

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and depth of cultural representation. Analysis of Tourism Malaysia's promotional materials (see Figures 2 a and b) reveals an underlying tension between marketing appeal and cultural integrity.

While these campaigns effectively highlight the diversity of Malaysian cuisine showcasing dishes from various ethnic traditions they frequently rely on stylized imagery and simplified narratives that risk flattening the richness of the country's culinary heritage. The portrayal of food tends to priorities visual attractiveness and mass appeal over contextual depth, potentially reducing multifaceted cultural practices into consumable symbols. This raises critical questions about the representational strategies employed to what extent do they preserve cultural nuance, and where do they begin to commodify tradition for the sake of branding? Such tendencies reflect broader debates within culinary tourism scholarship concerning the balance between authenticity, identity, and the demands of global marketability (Everett, 2015; Jalis et al., 2024).

(a) (b)

Figure 2. (a) & (b) Poster on food marketing on tourism Malaysia website for 2024

Together, the content of these posters demonstrates how Malaysian authorities employ curated visual narratives to promote culinary heritage. However, while these visuals are successful in communicating diversity and appeal, there is also a risk of oversimplification. The reliance on symbolic representations may lead to stereotypical portrayals that dilute the nuanced, lived realities of Malaysian food cultures, an issue identified by Yeoman et al. (2007) in their study of food and cultural commodification. Nevertheless, these campaigns illustrate the centrality of culinary heritage within Malaysia's tourism branding efforts and suggest an evolving maturity in using food as a vehicle for cultural storytelling and national representation.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Malaysia's government has shown a strong commitment to promoting its culinary heritage as a strategic asset in tourism branding, as evidenced by visually rich and symbolically charged promotional materials such as the Malaysia Fair 2024 posters and campaign. These efforts have not only elevated the visibility of Malaysian cuisine internationally but have also signalled broader policy objectives, including sustainability, cultural diplomacy, and economic recovery post-pandemic. However, despite the strengths

of these campaigns, challenges remain in ensuring authentic representation and fostering inclusive stakeholder collaboration particularly with local communities and food practitioners.

This study contributes to academic discourse on the role of governments in culinary tourism by analysing how visual narratives are used to brand destinations through food. The findings highlight the delicate balance between promotional effectiveness and cultural authenticity and underscore the complexity of leveraging intangible heritage for competitive advantage in a globalised tourism landscape. These insights are relevant not only for Malaysia but also for other multicultural destinations seeking to position food as a core element of their national brand.

For tourism practitioners and policymakers, several actionable recommendations emerge. First, integrated strategies are needed to connect national level branding efforts with grassroots, community-driven culinary experiences. This requires establishing formal mechanisms for cross-sectoral collaboration among government bodies, tourism operators, and local communities.

To safeguard authenticity while enabling commercial viability, heritage preservation policies should be strengthened. This research is limited by its focus on government-issued promotional content, which may not fully reflect the diverse lived experiences of tourists or local communities. Future studies involving primary data collection such as tourist feedback, stakeholder interviews, and ethnographic observation would offer deeper insights into the real-world impacts of culinary branding and heritage promotion.

Acknowledgments

The authors gratefully acknowledge the institutional support provided by Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Cawangan Pulau Pinang, Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), Sintok, Kedah Darul Aman, and Taylor's University, Malaysia. Appreciation is also extended to key tourism stakeholders, particularly Tourism Malaysia (TM) for providing access to relevant promotional materials that contributed to the development of this research.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Funding

All authors declare there is no funding support they received to carry out their research.

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